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Don't Give Secrets to a Rogue Elephant

Lt. Gen. James A. Abrahamson, newly appointed director of President Reagan's "Star Wars" missile defense program, could scarcely believe his eyes April 25 when he read in that morning's Washington Post a news account that reflected the congressional version of a rogue elephant rampaging at will on Capitol Hill.

"How the hell did this ever get into print?" Abrahamson exploded to Maj. Gen. E. R. Heiberg III, his project manager. He referred to a publicly released document by the congressional Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) attacking the Reagan space defense program and containing what the Defense Department defined as security information.

Heiberg's memorandum back to Abrahamson a week later fingered Peter J. Sharfman, manager of the OTA's international security division, and quoted Sharfman as saying that "Congress does not feel bound" by Pentagon secrecy. That looseness about making available to the Soviet Union new technology in the race for anti-missile space defense has led conservative Republican senators to request an FBI investigation of security breaches.

The overriding issue concerns semi-autonomous organizations, such as the OTA, that have sprouted in the growth of the massive congressional bureaucracy. They sometimes resemble the fabled rogue elephant, spewing out reports without regard for security rules in order to pursue their own policy interests.

The goal here is to bring down the Star Wars program. The OTA "Background Paper" by MIT research associate Ashton B. Carter (a former OTA employee) derided Star Wars as "so remote that it should not serve as the basis of public expectation or national policy." The 97-page document also contained what Pentagon officials insist is the most detailed description ever published of the so-called "Excalibur" system for creating an anti-missile defense by harnessing the energy of a nuclear explosion.

The OTA's Sharfman told us the report was security-cleared by the Army, a claim not confirmed by the Army. Heiberg's May 1 memorandum to Abrahamson (in answer to "how the hell" such information got into print) contained this explanation of why OTA did not ask for security clearance from the Pentagon's top brass: "When I asked Mr. Sharfman why he had not gone to the Office of the Secretary of Defense for security clearance, he said: 'We ask anyone we please.'"

In a legal sense, Sharfman was correct. Security rules are mainly presidential executive orders and have no legal standing in the legislative branch. But in the broader sense, security leaks on Capitol Hill can undermine the national interest.

OTA, much praised in the past for some of its research papers, is supposed to be governed by a congressional board. But Sen. Ted Stevens, Senate Republican whip and vice chairman of the OTA Board, said the first he knew of the Carter document was when he read about it in the newspapers. Democratic Rep. Morris Udall, now chairman of the rotating board, told us Carter's paper never had been approved because it was not an official "assessment."

Actually, the study by the MIT professor was cooked up by Sharfman and his OTA colleagues to find out more about the Pentagon program. "We didn't know enough about the subject to discuss it wisely," Sharfman told us. "We couldn't even ask the right questions." Backed by congressional authority and playing to an emotional anti-Star Wars mood, the OTA staff gave Carter carte blanche to prowl the most secret nuclear labs.

Not aired for public consumption was this devastating riposte to Carter in a Pentagon memo from Dr. W. B. Shuler, a top weapons engineer at California's Livermore lab: "The author has adopted a pejorative approach . . . littered with innuendo . . . inconsistent with current thinking in the defense technical community."

Reagan's attempt to create a workable space-based defense against an enemy's nuclear ballistic missiles is not going to fall on a single OTA background paper. But if Congress allows a semi-autonomous agency to probe at will from whatever ideological bias happens to be ascendant, a worthwhile experiment is threatened with abortion.

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